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ABSTRACT

This study focused on peer influences on dating, assessing the impact of peer attitudes about dating on the individual's affiliative system and examining the relationship between problem behavior and dating experiences. The study's final goal was to assess the relationship between the importance of affiliative activities and the extent of dating. Data were collected from 398 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders by means of a pencil and paper questionnaire; a subset of eighth graders completed a second questionnaire and had a personal interview. One key component was linking respondents to the responses of their peers. Participants listed their five best friends in school; peer network data were thereby available for 67 percent of respondents. Results showed that: (1) the importance of affiliate behavior as reported by peers is related to the adolescent's reported importance of affiliative behaviors; (2) that while problem behavior is related to initiation into dating, peers' reports of problem behavior are not related to the adolescent's dating experience; and (3) that formation of a romantic view (comprised mostly of affiliative behaviors during early dating) and the onset and frequency of dating are independent of each other. (EV)

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Dating as a Social Activity: The Importance of Peers

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Dating as a Social Activity: The Importance of Peers

Until recently research on early dating focused on the onset and frequency of dating. New work looks at how the other aspects of the dating relationship, such as attachment and care giving, develop over time. This study builds on this recent work. Dating in early adolescence is approached as a social behavior in which attachment and care giving features have only marginal importance. One of the underlying assumptions is that adolescents have a concept of romantic relationships regardless of whether they have ever dated.

Furman and Wehner's (1994) theory of the development of the romantic view emphasizes the role of the affiliative system at the early stages of dating. That is to say, dating at this stage revolves around the social activities that comprise the dating relationship. These relationships are more similar to friendships than the mother-child relationship in which care giving and attachment are primary features. Social aspects of dating are hypothesized to be learned from peers. When the adolescent begins to date expectations regarding social behaviors are shaped directly by experiences in peer relationships and indirectly by shared peer expectations about dating.

This paper focuses on peer influences on dating. The first model assesses the impact of peer attitudes about dating on the individual's affiliative system. Peer attitudes are assessed both directly, by peers' report, and indirectly, the individual's perception of peer attitudes.

The second goal of this paper is to examine the relationship between problem behavior and dating experience. This model assesses how well problem behavior reported by peers, problem behavior reported by the adolescent, and dating experience reported by peers, predicts the adolescent's dating experience.

Previously, the area that most early dating research focused on was initiation into dating and the frequency of dating. It has been found that early dating is related to problem behavior such as drug use and delinquency (Brown & Theobald, 1996).

Some researchers implied that attitudes about dating are reflected by measures of the onset and frequency of dating. However, Furman and Wehner (1994) theorize that romantic view and dating experience (onset and frequency of dating) should be independent of each other, dating experience being unrelated to a particular romantic view. Little empirical data has been used to support either claim. The final goal of this study is to assess the relationship between the importance of affiliative activities and the extent of dating.

Method

Participants.

Data was collected from 398 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, and a subset of 87 of the eighth graders also answered a second questionnaire. Participants were from a mostly middle class suburban middle-school in the northeast, the eighth graders were 57% female, 91% White, and 76% were from intact families.

Procedure.

Participants were administered a pencil and paper questionnaire in school by the researchers, the subset of eighth graders completed a second pencil and paper questionnaire and had a personal interview.

One of the key components of this research project was linking respondents to the responses of their peers. Participants listed their five best friends in school on the first questionnaire. While not all of their friends completed the surveys, by averaging among those who did, peer network data was available for 67% of the respondents.

Instruments.

The importance of affiliative behaviors. This was measured by a set of seven questions in which respondents were asked to rate how important dating activities were. These activities included such things as talking on the phone with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and going to the movies along with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Possible responses were: very important, important, a little important, and not important. The sum of responses to these seven questions yielded a 21 point scale.

Dating Experience. This construct was measured with the following two questions: Since the beginning of the school year, how often have you... had a boyfriend or girlfriend? ...been out on a date? Possible responses were: never, once, twice, and three or more times. The sum of these two questions yielded a seven point scale.

Perceived importance of dating to peers. This scale was the sum of two questions: Among the friends you hang out with, how important is it to... have a steady boyfriend or girlfriend? ...be popular with the opposite sex? Possible responses were: very important, important, a little important, and not very important. The sum of responses to these two questions yielded a seven point scale.

Problem behaviors. This scale was the average of four questions asking the respondents to rate: Since the beginning of the school year, how often have you... smoked cigarettes? had a drink of alcohol? had five or more drinks in a row? damaged property for fun? Possible responses were: never, once, twice, and three or more times. The average of these four questions was taken.

Peer Measures. After identifying the friends of the adolescent participant, composite scores were created by averaging the friend's scores on the following scales: importance of affiliative behaviors, problem behaviors, and dating experience.

Data Analysis.

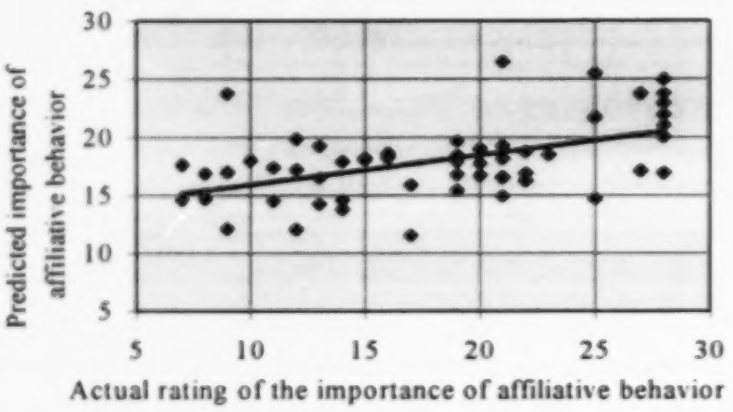
For purposes of analysis all variables are treated as continuous variables. For the first model the residuals are normally distributed and do not violate the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity. For the second model however, the independent variable dating experience is positively skewed because scores cluster around the low end. This skew also shows itself in the residuals, which are significantly skewed.

Results

In the present sample, 47% of all respondents reported no dating experience in the current school year, and 41% of eighth graders reported no dating experience in eighth grade. Also, 48% of all students, and 38% of eighth graders reported no negative behavior during that school year.

The hypothesis that importance of affiliative behaviors is correlated with the individual's perception of peer values and with actual reported peer values was tested with a linear regression model. This model used only the subset of eighth graders who completed the second survey, of which 57 had complete data and were included in analysis. The two independent variables are assumed to be separate measures of the same thing, dating attitudes of peers, however the correlation between them was only moderate $r=.26$, $p<.05$, therefore it made sense to include both variables in the model. The over all model accounted for a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable $F(2,54)=9.17$, $p<.001$, $R^2=.25$ (See Figure 1). Both independent variables also had a significant unique relationship to the importance of affiliative behaviors, $\beta=.25$ ($T=2.02$, $p<.05$) for perceived importance of dating to friends, and $\beta=.37$ ($T=3.06$, $p<.01$) for the importance of affiliative behaviors reported by peers.

Figure 1. Relationship between reported and predicted values for first model.



Gender differences were found for the first model. When analyzed separately, the model explained less variance for girls ($R^2=.07$) than for boys ($R^2=.48$). Peers' self-reports of the importance of affiliative behaviors had a much stronger relationship to the importance of affiliative behaviors for boys ($\beta=.59$, $T=3.33$, $p<.01$) than for girls ($\beta=.03$, $T=.17$).

Table 1

	.51*	.29*	.26*
Problem Behavior	...	.35*	.44*
Dating	...	...	.70*

* significant at $p<.001$.

The second hypothesis that dating experience would be significantly related to problem behavior reported by the individuals, the composite problem behavior from their peer network, and the dating experience reported by their peers, was only partially substantiated. This regression model included 275 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders from the first questionnaire. Moderate to high correlations were found between the three independent variables (See Table 1). Peers' reported problem behavior was not an independent predictor of

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the adolescent's dating experience (β=.003, T=.05) and was deleted from the model. The resulting omnibus analysis of the model proved significant $F(2,272)=50.34$ $p<.0001$. Both remaining independent variables had a significant unique relationship to the individual's reported dating experience, β=.46 (T=8.26, $p<.0001$) for individual's problem behavior and β=.14 (T=2.44, $p<.05$) for the composite of peer's reported dating experience. No gender differences were found in this model.

The third hypothesis that there would be no significant relationship between importance of affiliative behavior to the individual and the individual's extent of dating was confirmed. However, a weak relationship r=.20, (p=.09) between the two variables was found.

Discussion

The importance of affiliate behavior as reported by the peers, is related to the adolescent's reported importance of affiliative behaviors. It is interesting that the individual's perceptions of peer attitudes was only weakly correlated with peers' actual reports. Individual's were asked to make a global rating of their peers' attitudes about dating, while the peer reports are only the responses of their best friends. Previous research has shown that the best friends and friendship groups have an independent influence on the adolescent (Pilgrim & Degirmencioglu, 1996).

The gender differences found in relation to the first hypothesis are interesting. Boys appear to be more influenced by their perceptions of peers' attitudes about dating then girls do. This was not due to gender differences in the importance of affiliative behaviors. Feiring (1996) found that boys and girls differed only in the domain of intimacy when expressing their concept of romantic partners, and that girls had more to say about all aspects of dating. This gender difference should be explored in further research.

The second hypothesis was only partially supported. Brown and Theobald's (1996) findings that problem behavior is related to initiation into dating were replicated. However, peers' reported problem behavior was not related to the adolescent's dating experience, and peers' dating experience was only weakly related to the adolescent's extent of dating.

It is also interesting to note that girls and boys did not differ significantly in regards to the second model. Gender differences in problem behavior and in the onset of dating would suggest that differences in extent of dating would occur. However, this result also replicates the findings of Brown and Theobald (1996), and is possibly due to the fact that although a lower percentage of girls rate high in problem behavior than boys those that do have just as many problems as the high rating boys.

The third hypothesis, that importance of affiliative behavior and dating experience are not related was supported. This provides support for the notion that romantic view (comprised mostly of affiliative behaviors during early dating), and the onset and frequency of dating are independent of each other. The fact that the two models were only weekly related to each other suggests that early dating is approached by the adolescent as a risk-taking behavior, not an important romantic relationship. In this theory there are two aspects to early dating, the romantic view in which affiliative behaviors are important, and risk-taking behavior. Dating is seen not as leading to risk-taking behavior, but as simply one among many risk-taking behaviors that the adolescent is likely to get involved in. As dating becomes more common place, it loses it's status as a risk-taking behavior, while the romantic view become more important as relationships become more serious.

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